

Cilantro vs parsley

There's often [confusion](#) between these two wonderful culinary herbs, for both cooks and gardeners. [Cilantro](#) and flat-leaf parsley have similar uses and are practically twins of each other, visually, but they do have distinct differences. This article clarifies their individual characteristics, including their growth habits.



It's a good day on the blog when I get to talk about two of my favorite, most useful, fresh herbs: cilantro and parsley. As a cooking educator, I often get questions about when to use which. And in the garden, there are often assumptions that they grow similarly to each other, which is not quite the case.

A couple of notes before we get started. In the U.S., we refer to the green leaves of cilantro as *cilantro*, while in Europe and India they're called

coriander. In the U.S., coriander are the seeds of the cilantro plant.

There are two main types of parsley: flat-leaf (or Italian) and curly. Flat-leaf parsley has a strong, herbal, grassy flavor. Curly parsley, on the other hand, is mild in flavor and papery in texture and is usually used just as a garnish. All references to “parsley” in this article will be referencing flat-leaf parsley.

Now, let's get to the deets!

Botanical Overview

Cilantro (*Coriandrum sativum*) – Cilantro (formerly known as Chinese parsley) is a member of the Apiaceae family, and is actually related to parsley. Not surprisingly, given their appearance.

Parsley (*Petroselinum crispum*) – As noted above, parsley is related to cilantro and is also a member of the Apiaceae family, which includes carrots, fennel, chervil, dill, cumin, lovage, celery, parsnips, Queen Anne's lace, and more.

Some members of this family – including parsley, dill, carrots, and parsnips – have interesting blooming habits, where the seed-producing flowers are huge, showy, umbrella-like structures, known as umbels, with tiny yellow or white flowers.

Flavor

Cilantro: Also known as coriander in Europe and India, cilantro has a distinct, pungent flavor often described as fresh, citrusy, and slightly peppery. Most people have a love/hate relationship with cilantro because of the presence of *aldehydes*, which some perceive as a soapy or metallic flavor. But for those of us where cilantro doesn't taste like soap, it's a much beloved herb that's crucial in salsas and guacamole.

Parsley: Flat-leaf parsley has a more robust flavor, described as fresh, slightly bitter, grassy and earthy with pepper undertones, making it suitable for a variety of dishes, especially within Italian cuisine.



Plant Life Cycle

Cilantro: Cilantro is an annual plant, meaning it completes its life cycle — grows from seed, produces leaves, and then flowers to produce seeds — in one growing season, and does not survive from one year to another.

Cilantro is distinctly a cool-weather plant and will bolt (go to seed) as soon as the weather turns hot. This, of course, is a real bummer for salsa lovers, as cilantro's growing season does not overlap with onions, tomatoes, and peppers.

Cilantro is easy to grow from seed, and also easily produces seed. When the plant produces flowers, leave it be, and you'll see seeds appear soon enough. Interestingly, the young, tender, bright green seeds are edible and delicious — pick a few for a treat in your green salads.

Mature seeds will dry out to brown, and can be ground into the spice known as coriander, or saved to replant next year.

Parsley: Parsley, like many other species in the Apiaceae family, including carrots, is actually a biennial plant, which means it takes two years to complete its life cycle. It grows delicious, edible leaves in its first year and dies back. Then resprouts in the spring of the second year to produce flowers and seeds. Seeds that drop to the ground can sprout the following year as a first-year plant, beginning the cycle anew.

Most gardeners grow parsley as an annual reseeding fresh every year. My parsley garden, however, contains both first and second-year plants, so I have a yearly supply of fresh parsley without having to reseed each year. Second-year plants do have green foliage, but they're easy to tell apart from first-year plants, as the leaves are long and spindly and definitely not very flavorful.

Growing Conditions

Cilantro – As mentioned above, cilantro is a cool-weather plant and grows best in the spring. You can plant seeds as soon as the soil warms sufficiently. Or sow them in containers, which is what I normally do.

Unfortunately, cilantro will bolt as soon as the weather gets hot, even if only briefly. Here in the Ohio Valley, we usually have a freak 90°F hot streak over Memorial Day weekend before cooling back down to normal June temps. That small stretch is enough to send plants into flowering mode.

Like most herbs, cilantro prefers loamy, well-draining soil and even watering throughout its short growing cycle.

Parsley – Parsley is much hardier than its cousin, cilantro, and can tolerate a wide variety of conditions. Sow parsley seeds in late spring, when the threat of frost and snow has passed. Seeds will take a while to germinate, so be patient.

Parsley grows well in loamy, well-draining soil and thrives in full sun or partial shade. I always plant parsley in its own in-ground bed, because it's quite prolific and, with enough seeding, can grow into a large, bushy bed.

One really cool thing about flat-leaf parsley is that it can survive cold temperatures surprisingly well. In fact, one winter, as an experiment, I draped a row cover over an entire first-year crop, and the plants lasted well into February, full-flavored and everything. Here's a photo of the experiment in late December that year:



I do believe the plants would've lasted even longer if we hadn't had a significant snowstorm that tore down the row covers and flattened the bed with wet, heavy snow.

